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Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis

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The Gastrodynamics of Edna Pontellier's liberation.[1]

Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis

It is no coincidence that Stanley Kowalski comes back from work and welcomes Stella by throwing a piece of meat on the kitchen table in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This gesture, presenting Stanley as the sole survivor of the Stone Age, denotes primitive power and masculinity, because meat, as Bourdieu explains, "is the dish for men" (1984, 192). In a larger perspective the scene symbolizes what patriarchy has communicated through foodways—the traditional distribution of tightly regulated gendered behavior in households. According to an increasing number of contemporary food scholars, food is much more than just nutrition. It is embedded with social, cultural, and symbolic values. Anderson goes so far as to say that "food is rather like language" (2005, 110) as it communicates an array of meanings and identities. From this critical angle, culinary practices have been used in the South since antebellum times to guard gender differences, and especially to reinforce a myth of perfect womanhood. The image of women immersed in domesticity and gratified at the prospect of being useful, submissive and servile defined many a young Southern woman's existence in the context of foodways and in so doing indoctrinated them into acceptance of traditional inferior roles.

Thus, food can be read as a trope signifying gender relations in Southern society. Because dining rituals (both the preparation of food and its consumption) become a symbol of gender, they may become a vehicle for the acceptance or rejection of social identity imposed by a given society. In this article I will attempt to analyze the significance of cooking and dining rituals, through which a writer can address the issue of gendered existence in the South. In *The Awakening,* Kate Chopin uses foodways to define and transgress the social and cultural boundaries of acceptable female behavior as well as to reinscribe woman's identity through the culinary dimension of her heroine's life. The novelist uses eating and dining scenes as metaphors for Edna Pontellier's search for her female selfhood and, in a broader perspective, as symbols of the major issue of her own fiction—gender trouble in the South. Thus, food studies—both cultural studies and

sociology of foodways—will be an entry point into the studies of shifting gender relations in *The Awakening*.

Faced with a rigid division of labor, women have often chosen cooking as a creative outlet for their passions. They have written cookbooks as peculiar culinary autobiographical accounts of their gendered existence but they have also used the kitchen-floor and the space of the dining room as a site of rebellion, and food as a weapon against gender dominance. Regardless of region, race, religion or culture, the preparation of food has lain within women's domain (Goody, 1982, 193). Anthropologists and sociologists have agreed to categorize activities connected with domestic food work as women's responsibility. Caring for the nourishment of the family as well as for its sustenance stems from the essence of a female. Hence, woman is the nurturing force (Bell and Valentine, 1997, 70). Female sensitivity, empathy and emotionality, are said to naturally enable women to endow foodways with emotional richness; "femininity," according to Lupton, "involves cooking for others, offering food as love, being highly aware of one's own body's needs and those of others for whom one is charged with caring" (1996, 109). Feeding is thus a complicated gendered issue.

The South, where "images and practices of food preparation, service, and consumption define women's lives" is not an exception in this culinary landscape (Prenshaw, 1992, 8). Patriarchal ideology maintained that food preparation was women's privilege, duty, and personal fulfillment. On the one hand, Southern patriarchs were able to tie women to the domestic sphere by enshrining their role in culinary processes (the goal was achieved by perceiving activities connected with foodways and domesticity as metaphors for the Cult of True Womanhood); on the other hand, "the kitchen and garden have served as arenas where many Southern women [...] have exercised power and creativity" (Prenshaw, 1992, 6). In the case of Edna Pontellier, the central character of *The Awakening*, food is neither a creative outlet, nor a circumscription of her personhood in the domestic sphere. Rather, various dining experiences become metaphors for her disintegrating marriage; the liberating exposure to Creole culture and Cajuns' interstitial social position allows Edna to assert her agency through culinary practices; and, in general, her journey to self-knowledge and subjectivity within a marriage that has diminished her to non-personhood is framed through foodways.

Edna becomes Mrs. Léonce Pontellier to spite her family and to replace a youthful infatuation for a tragedian with a very tangible man who adores her. Léonce "pleased her; his absolute devotion flattered her. She fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which fancy she was mistaken" (Chopin, 1992, 24). From the beginning of her marriage, Edna shares few interests, thoughts or hobbies with her husband, mainly because of Edna's status as an outsider to Creole society: Edna is Kentucky Presbyterian and Léonce is Louisiana Catholic Creole. Lack of honest communication or any exchange of desires between the spouses is culturally based. This family status quo thus manifests itself in Mr. Pontellier's frequent visits to clubs in the evenings. During one of the many soirées musicales thatEdna attends at the Ratignolles' alone without Léonce, she frankly admits to the host "What should I do if he stayed home? We wouldn't have anything to say to each other" (91).

For all his overt affection, love and pampering, Mr. Pontellier does not really care about his wife's spiritual and emotional well-being. His indifference to her needs is framed in food-references. Mr. Pontellier asserts his dominance in their marriage through dining:

> 'Coming back to dinner?' his wife called after him. He halted a moment and shrugged his shoulders. [...] He did not know; perhaps he would return for the early dinner and perhaps he would not. It all depended upon the company which he found over at Klein's[2] and the size of "the game." He did not say this, but she understood it, and laughed, nodding good-by to him. (3-4)

Edna's laughter, a way of putting a bold face on her utter subjection, symbolizes disintegration of marriage evidenced by Léonce's rejection of dining together.

Mr. Pontellier wants to show everyone that he adores Edna; thus, he frequently sends her boxes "filled with friandises, with luscious and toothsome bits—the finest of fruits, patés, a rare bottle or two, delicious syrups, and bonbons in abundance" (9). The choice of bonbons as the main ingredient of the gifts is telling. With the copiousness of chocolates, he sends a message to Edna in particular and the Creole community in general that he can afford to, and wants to spoil and indulge his so-called "better half." Chocolate, which "is culturally understood as a highly emotionally coded food that inspires feelings of self-indulgence and hedonistic ecstasy" (Lupton, 1996, 36), works perfectly for Léonce. With the gift of bonbons, Léonce thus underscores the feminine weakness in Edna's personality (she easily yields to bodily temptation).[3] Thus the gift becomes another proof of Léonce's power over Edna.

Mrs. Pontellier is used to her husband's revealing his generosity with baskets of sweet and luxurious products that offer no sustenance. These sweets, lacking nutritious value, demonstrate unsatisfactory relationship between Edna and Léonce. When the gift arrives, she passes around the bonbons and "the ladies, selecting with dainty and discriminating fingers and a little greedily, all [declare] that Mr. Pontellier [is] the best husband in the world. Mrs. Pontellier [is] forced to admit that she knew of none better" (Chopin, 1992, 9). The whole ritual of sharing bonbons is a strategy designed by Léonce, because "what is at stake [in gift-giving] is the circulation of one's future reputation" (Sutton, 2001, 45). Léonce, aware of female vanity, gossiping and sharing, hopes for an audience that would appreciate him as a perfect husband and thus reaffirm Edna in her identity.

The sweets can also be seen as one of the echoes of the theme of childhood. Consumption of and fondness for sweets, apart from capturing the pure enjoyment associated with childhood as well as being the energy-booster for exuberant children, may also be seen as a symbol of the heroine's immaturity and selfishness. Much like a child, who in a contrarian spirit refuses to accept reality for what it is, Edna fails to understand the implications of her actions and take responsibility for them. She marries Léonce with malice aforethought and becomes a disconsolate wife and mother of two. Then, in an act of rebellion, she moves into the pigeon-house for which she receives permission and resources from her husband, has an extramarital affair but is not ready to disregard societal opinions about female sexual freedom. Despite the fact that Edna is no longer a subjugated woman who passively internalizes patriarchal expectations, she is not ready to discover her female subjectivity. The heroine's final decision, so extolled by feminists as a self-empowering act, rather suggests that she cannot truly express her desires and can only find emancipation in death.

Kate Chopin also uses scenes involving food to demonstrate the lack of sincerity, communication and honesty between Edna and Léonce. One dinner particularly can be seen as a sign of the collapse of the Pontelliers' marriage. Food typically plays a part in domestic quarrels when a husband wants to find fault with his partner's domestic responsibilities. The easiest way is to denigrate the outcome of the wife's culinary

activities, which are allegedly no longer up to prior standards (Lupton, 1996, 61). As Léonce cannot criticize Edna directly, because she does not prepare the food herself, he attacks the culinary abilities of their cook: "This soup is really impossible; it's strange that woman hasn't learned yet to make a decent soup. Any free-lunch stand in town serves a better one" (Chopin, 1992, 67). Léonce's remarks are also aimed at breaking female solidarity across the class and racial boundaries. His direct accusations, which hide covert criticism of his wife's failing to fulfil her wifely duties, pit Edna against other women. If in the dining room Edna, much like her husband, is the member of the bourgeoisie that oppresses lower social classes and other racial groups, then the space of the kitchen could potentially offer female bonding against patriarchal dominance. Skilfully, Léonce precludes solidarity against patriarchy by equally entangling Edna in Louisiana class and racial categories as in the web of gender relations.

The narrator reveals Mr. Pontellier's further dissatisfaction with the main course: "The fish was scorched. Mr. Pontellier would not touch it. [...] The roast was in some way not to his fancy, and he did not like the manner in which the vegetables were served" (67). The ensuing conversation about the entrée illustrates the claim of two food anthropologists that "the meal itself might be the pretext for airing more deeply rooted dissatisfactions" (qtd. Lupton, 1996, 61):

> 'It seems to me,' he said, 'we spend money enough in this house to procure at least one meal a day which a man could eat and retain his self-respect.'
> 'You used to think the cook was a treasure,' returned Edna, indifferently.
> 'Perhaps she was when she first came; but cooks are only human. They need looking after, like any other class of persons that you employ. Suppose I didn't look after the clerks in my office, just let them run things their own way; they'd soon make a nice mess of me and my business.' (Chopin, 1992, 68)

The criticism of the scorched fish is Léonce's indirect attack on Edna's domestic duties—managing servants and running their household. By castigating the dinner, he clearly expresses his dissatisfaction with what he believes to be Edna's negligence of her wifely obligations. The heroine's indifferent tone to Léonce's indirect accusations of her no longer being a valuable position in his household reveals marital breakdown.

The conclusion of this food-gender related conflict is not incidental. Leaving the plate untouched, Léonce ostentatiously gets his dinner at the club. Frequent eating out "becomes a public demonstration of an individual's possession of both economic and cultural capital, phrased as their sense of taste" (Lupton, 1996, 98); however, choosing to eat out could be a means to punish the wife after denigrating her culinary achievements (Warde and Martens, 2000, 47). The case of the Pontelliers demonstrates that similar situations would send ripples through their married life and more importantly would damage Edna's self-esteem: she is "somewhat familiar with such scenes. They had often made her very unhappy. On a few previous occasions she had been completely deprived of any desire to finish her dinner. Sometimes she had gone into the kitchen to administer a tardy rebuke to the cook" (Chopin, 1992, 68). By depriving Edna of her desire to eat (that is, to follow her natural instinct of self-preservation), Mr. Pontellier weakens her desire to preserve her selfhood and personhood within her wedded state. In order to avert the disintegration of the marriage, Mrs. Pontellier tries fervently to carry out her wifely duties, but to little effect, as arranging a week-menu to please her husband brings the opposite result—the feeling that her actions have little if any sense and value.

What Mr. Pontellier achieves by ostentatiously dining out, apart from thwarting Edna's personhood, is a statement of his individualism (Finkelstein 4)[4]—as a man, and as the

head of the family, Léonce can freely choose where, when, and with whom he wants to dine.[5] With his decision to eat out at Klein's hotel, he also shows typical disregard for the values "home-cooked" meals stand for: "meanings of security, familial love and comfort" (Lupton, 1996, 98)—the very values which define women's lives. Dining together seems to be a casualty of the collapse of the Pontelliers' marriage.

Edna is surely not satisfied with how wifehood limits her personality. Neither does she feel fulfilled in her role as a mother. Motherly feelings seem a contingent category in the reservoir of Edna's features; she is "not a mother-woman" (Chopin, 1992, 10). Food imagery is used once again to comment on maternity. Those women who are "delicious in the role" of mothers (10) are desirable to patriarchs as they promise to prolong the family trees with their progeny. In contrast to these women, Mrs. Pontellier's ambiguous maternal feelings are visible in Edna's intense longing for her children while they are away punctuated by relief resulting from their absence. Sometimes she forgets them; at other times she is "hungry for them" (95). Food, or lack thereof, becomes a metaphor for her conflicted feelings. She herself seems to be domesticated into maternity by the Cult of True Womanhood. Thus for her, motherhood is a responsibility she has been coerced into assuming against her own nature (24). No wonder then, that Edna blames both matrimony and motherhood for the erosion of her personhood.

In contradistinction, Adèle Ratignolle is a woman who complacently accepts wifehood and motherhood as two roles defining her existence. A midday dinner at the Ratignolles, from which the harmony of the hosts' marriage emanates, underscores and intensifies, by virtue of opposition, the disintegration of the Pontelliers' marriage. Midday dinners are one of the elements of married life that unite the Ratignolles. The couple establish and enhance the harmony of their marriage by sharing food. "The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union" (73). Because "the sharing of food, is a means by which to establish physical commingling, interdependence, and oneness" (Meigs, 1997, 103), the Ratignolles can express their integrity and interconnectedness through this dining ritual. This blending of selves is visible in Adèle's ability to completely immerse herself in her husband's stories. She is "keenly interested in everything he [says], laying down her fork the better to listen, chiming in, taking the words out of his mouth" (Chopin, 1992, 74). Not only does Adèle complete her husband, but she also seems to accept complacently the power structure in their family. In order to express Edna's opinion about the "eating-induced unity" (Meigs, 1997, 95) in the Ratignolle household, the narrator once again resorts to a food metaphor: "a delicious repast, simple, choice, and in every way satisfying" (Chopin, 1992, 74).[6]

Every woman should be satisfied with—or so the patriarchy would have women believe—such a harmonious union with a man like Monsieur Ratignolle, whose "cheerfulness was unbounded, and [...] was matched by his goodness of heart, his broad charity, and common sense" (73). The depression which accompanies Mrs. Pontellier on her way out of the Ratignolles' house is presumably caused by her realization that such harmony could never satisfy her: "The little glimpse of domestic harmony which had been offered her, gave her no regret, no longing. It was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui" (74). Edna feels no regrets for what she is "missing" in her life, because she pities Madame Ratignolle's "colorless existence which never uplifted its possessor beyond the region of blind contentment, in which no moment of anguish ever visited her soul, in which she would never have the taste of life's

delirium" (74). Edna is not willing to compromise herself and live blindly content with such a colorless existence. She wants to sample "life's delirium," a foretaste of which she has when vacationing at Grand Isle.

Grand Isle is where Edna's female personhood is born and terminated. In the 1870s this ocean resort was a luxurious place outside New Orleans for affluent Creoles to spend their vacation (Toth, 1999, 78). The exotic and seductive landscape of the island, coupled with "an atmosphere of lazy sensuality, few obligations," dancing and recitations (Toth, 1999, 80), conspired against the better moral judgment of some men and women. To the accompaniment of music, with sensuous interplay of light, and with tables laden with food and drink, Creoles spent their evenings entertaining themselves (Chopin, 1992, 29-30). Those evenings infused with singing, eating and dancing, solidified and preserved Creole culture. Even though no scenes of sexual laxity or dissipation are mentioned in the novel, Creoles' "entire absence of prudery" (12) and inclinations towards excessive flirting suggest the sensuous nature of Creole men and women alike. This may come as a shock to non-Creole visitors to this paradise on Earth. McCullough sees a connection between social status, female power and erotic agency in Chopin's portrayal of Creole and white women. She links female erotic power to their ethnic status: "the degree of erotic agency and power Chopin grants her female Creole and Cajun characters is directly related to their ethnic/regional identities" (McCullough, 1999, 208). Creole women unite opposites in their characters: they are more sensuous and more self-aware of their potential than repressed white Southern women, and on the other hand, they are characterized by what Chopin identifies as "a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable" (Chopin, 1992, 12).

In this scenery Mrs. Pontellier comes to life as a woman. Two aspects of this awakening need further analysis: its location and its agent. After a nap in one of the cots on the island Chênière Caminada—caused, quite tellingly, by a feeling of oppression and the stifling atmosphere of the church (46)—in a Sleeping-Beauty fashion, Edna is rescued from lethargy by a male figure.[7] Chênière Caminada, apart from Grand Isle with its Creolean flavor, is the site of Edna's awakening.[8] Populated by Cajuns, this island offers a rare opportunity for Edna to challenge gender roles. Edna literally and metaphorically wakes up to her new self in Madame Antoine's cot. Madame Antoine is a Cajun, a member of an ethnic group which has "remained *in between* racial, social, and economic categories, making them interstitial figures in both history and fiction" (Hebert-Leiter, 2009, 6) and as such they reveal the complexities of Louisiana social and racial make-up.[9] This in-between state not only allows for an exploration of various options, but also makes room for contemplating alternatives which are unacceptable in white-Catholic New Orleans community. After her exposure to morally relaxed, hedonistic and creative Cajun culture, Edna, as Hebert-Leiter persuasively argues, appropriates Cajun ways[10] and "in doing so, create[s] a space of desire for [herself]" (2009, 70). Chênière Caminada, along with Creolean Grand Isle, provides space for liberation from patriarchal structures:[11] it is in Madame Antoine's cot that Edna eats her first meal after "awakening." The meal Madame Antoine has prepared for Edna consists of bread and wine, a combination which assuredly evokes a religious dimension. It not only satiates Edna's hunger, but it also becomes a sort of celebration of a new life/self. However, the risks and the fate of Edna's liberation are symbolically written on the table where "a cover was laid for one" (Chopin, 1992, 49). Edna's solitary consumption of bread and wine, precluding solidarity and companionship

which could sustain her in her endeavors,[12] foreshadows the reasons behind her solitary dinners in the café Catiche out in the New Orleans suburbs.

As a rewriting of the tale of Sleeping Beauty, *The Awakening* offers no happily-ever-after for Edna as the heroine does not want to settle for what patriarchy has to offer. Neither is she ready to accept the consequences of sexual freedom she craves. As a modern spin on the tale of Sleeping Beauty, Edna's awakening is granted by a male. Retrospectively, she admits to Robert Lebrun, her Creole landlady's son: "It was you who awoke me last summer out of a life-long, stupid dream" (143). Unlike the fairytale predecessor, Edna is woken up seemingly not by a dominant male figure but by a man serving food. The reversed division of gender roles around food production and consumption is misleading (here it is a man who prepares a meal for a woman), if not falsely supporting Edna in her emancipatory endeavors. In this role Robert is less openly dominating than men from Kentucky—that is Edna's stern father. However, Robert's apparent and deceptive abandon of a patriarchal rigorous order—visible in his serving a woman—is a foreshadowing element that would have serious consequences for their future together expressed in their final conversation in the suburban café. This gender role reversal around food preparation simply hides a different codification of the asymmetry between the genders.

The meal Robert has prepared for Edna satiates her physical appetite: "He was childishly gratified to discover her appetite, and to see the relish with which she ate the food which he had procured for her" (50). This scene not only alludes to the man as the giver and woman as the recipient of pleasure, but it also explicitly alludes to one appetite (physical hunger) representing another (carnal desire). The same display of enjoyment of food and male company reappears during Edna's private dinner with Alcée Arobin in her husband's home. Upon realizing the same (sexual) appetite during the intensely interesting afternoon spent in Arobin's company, Edna dismisses her admirer (100-01). Quite interestingly, Mrs. Pontellier does not feel guilty of marital infidelity, but she feels she has betrayed Robert which whom she originally shared intimate companionship over food on Chênière Caminada (102).

Exposure to Creole culture, which values "freedom of expression" (12), along with Robert's advances, prompts Edna to reevaluate her position and fulfillment in both marriage and motherhood. Edna's various deviations from dining customs in her household illustrate her rejection of the role patriarchy has prescribed. First of all, inspired by the Creole freedom of expression, Edna begins "to do as she like[s] and to feel as she like[s] [...] lending herself to any passing caprice" (74-5). Soon she begins "to look with her own eyes; to see and to apprehend the deeper undercurrents of life. No longer was she content to 'feed upon opinion' when her own soul had invited her" (124). This transformation is visible during dinner with Doctor Mandelet, the long-time family physician. Interestingly enough, the circumstances of the dinner may explain Léonce's acceptance of Edna's subtle change in conduct: "The dinner was excellent. The claret was warm and the champagne was cold, and under their beneficent influence the threatened unpleasantness melted and vanished with the fumes of the wine" (92). Edna's radiance, her "warm and energetic" speech and her being "palpitant with the forces of life" (92)—all signs of her budding self-confidence—are left uncommented on by her husband. The liberating and relaxing influence of alcohol is a convenient justification of Edna's behavior for a husband who does not really want to know what is troubling his wife. Alcohol thus transforms a potentially hostile culinary experience into a pleasant evening.

The social function of Tuesday afternoons in the Pontellier household is the second dining ritual of Edna's household which undergoes changes after her return from Grand Isle. Mrs. Pontellier no longer respectfully obeys her husband. She no longer observes her custom of receiving various frequent callers at her home on Tuesdays, which she had "religiously followed since her marriage, six years before" (66). Edna refuses to obediently fulfill the wifely duties imposed on her because of Léonce's social/business obligations. Not only does Edna "completely [abandon] her Tuesdays at home, and not return the visits of those who [call] upon her. She [makes] no ineffectual efforts to conduct her household en bonne ménagère, going and coming as it [suits] her fancy" (74-5). More importantly, Edna shows no sign of remorse or guilt about either neglecting her duties or refusing to retain one of the cardinal feminine duties—wifely submissiveness. Interestingly, when confronted by Léonce about her duties, she is defiantly "eating her soup with evident satisfaction" (66). Edna transfers her satisfaction with winning some degree of personal autonomy to her sheer pleasure of consuming soup.

The third change in Edna's conduct is connected with her solitary meals. Often family disruption or marriage disintegration manifests itself in weight loss caused by "a sense of general debilitation and unhappiness that [suppresses people's] desire for food" (Lupton, 1996, 62). In similar cases in the past when Léonce attempted to punish Edna by leaving her alone at the dinner table, she felt guilty and thus imposed culinary restraint on herself. Upon return from Grand Isle, Edna refuses the literal and metaphorical self-starvation and abnegation attendant upon the image of the perfect lady: "that evening Edna finished her dinner alone, with forced deliberation. Her face was flushed and her eyes flamed with some inward fire that lighted them" (Chopin, 1992, 68). The solitary meal serves as a vehicle of celebration of her newly-discovered personhood. On a later occasion, during Léonce's absence, she eats a delicious repast, with "a luscious tenderloin broiled a point" and good wine; "the marron glacé [seems] to be just what she wanted" (95). The delicious feeling of knowing what she wants from her life certainly finds representation in the comfort and pleasure of dining alone.

Edna Pontellier's rebellion against the patriarchal definition of her existence climaxes in the final dinner party, before she moves out of her husband's house (an act which symbolizes Edna's assertion of freedom from Léonce's dominance). Realizing that the final dinner represents Edna's symbolic self-empowerment, Arobin shrewdly calls it "the grand event, the coup d'état" (113). Edna gathers her friends in order to celebrate and share her forging of a new life on her 29th birthday. Much like the impact of the Dionysian mysteries on the participants, Edna's final dinner frees her from all oppressive restraints and inhibitions—in this case those of patriarchal marriage.As the "food served on special occasions [...] is usually highly ritualized" (Lupton, 1996, 63), the farewell dinner—its preparations, the selection of guests, and the meal itself like communion—seems to fit the paradigm of a religious ritual.[13] The prelude to the grand event itself does not occupy a lot of space in the narrative, mainly because the cook and servants are responsible for supplying food for the larder and preparing the dishes, while Edna preoccupies herself with packing her belongings.

In all religious rituals congregation is essential. Here Edna's friends assembling to partake in this euphoric dinner constitute a group of ten "selected with discrimination" (Chopin, 1992, 114). The hostess, who unites all the guests, sits at the head of the table, like a priestess. In a social context, food can communicate even more than language itself. The

seating arrangement at the table therefore communicates both Edna's sympathies and possible future life choices.[14] Mrs. Pontellier sits between two opposing examples of morality—"Arobin and Monsieur Ratignolle [sitting] on either side of their hostess" (115) —symbolically referring to two conflicting types of manhood Edna has been pitting against each other.

In Edna's preparations of "the grand event" one can trace the Dionysian ambience. In a conversation with Arobin the future hostess reveals: "it will be very fine; all my best of everything—crystal, silver and gold, Sèvres, flowers, music, and champagne to swim in" (113).Before the food, which constitutes the heart of the ritual, the scenery and atmosphere are so sensuous that only synesthesia can do justice to describing the event.[15] The synesthetic nature of this socio-culinary event is visible in the interpenetrating effects of the combination of the splendor of the color-coordinated tables (silver, gold, and crystal intermingling), the mandolin music and the scent of roses (115-7). The table itself captures a pronounced Dionysian imagery:

> There was something extremely gorgeous about the appearance of the table, an effect of splendor conveyed by a cover of pale yellow satin under strips of lace-work. There were wax candles in massive brass candelabra, burning softly under yellow silk shades; full, fragrant roses, yellow and red, abounded. There were silver and gold, as she had said there would be, and crystal which glittered like the gems which the women wore. (115)

These elementsof dining create a relaxed and frivolous atmosphere among people who ordinarily might not socialize with each other: "The moments glided on, while a feeling of good fellowship passed around the circle like a mystic cord, holding and binding these people together with jest and laughter" (118). In such Dionysian atmosphere all the guests become what Bourdieu calls *bon vivants*—people "capable of entering into the generous and familiar ... in a conviviality which sweeps away restraints and reticence" (1984, 179). Their eating, drinking and general good spirits create a frivolous and liberated atmosphere which seems to reflect Edna's "new self." Even the selection of chairs seems to be an objective correlative of Edna's new priorities in life. Like the discarded stiff corset of marital relations, "[t]he ordinary stiff dining chairs [...] [are] discarded for the occasion and replaced by the most commodious and luxurious which could be collected throughout the house" (Chopin, 1992, 115).

The final dinner radiates with the hostess at the center. Edna begins her farewell/ birthday party as Mrs. Léonce Pontellier with all the religious ritual overtones that would lead her to celebrate herself. In her posture Edna becomes a version of sensually clad Praxiteles' Knidian Aphrodite:

> The golden shimmer of Edna's satin gown spread in rich folds on either side of her. There was a soft fall of lace encircling her shoulders. It was the color of her skin, without the glow, the myriad living tints that one may sometimes discover in vibrant flesh. There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone. (117-8)

Such an image of the sumptuous hostess herself, intensified with "a magnificent cluster of diamonds that sparkled, that almost sputtered, in Edna's hair, just over the center of her forehead" (115), evokes the iconographic image of Aphrodite as the Goddess of Beauty and Love. In her ability to create sexual attraction and take delight in her sensual nature Edna can be identified with Aphrodite.[16] Yet beneath the undeniable qualities of the goddess, such as Edna's beauty, charm, magnetism, ease of comportment, lurks the need

to experience life with the loved one. Ennui sneaks in as Edna realizes that her happiness also depends on sharing it with her absent lover: "the acute longing which always summoned into her spiritual vision the presence of the beloved one, overpowering her at once with a sense of the unattainable" (118).

Mrs. Léonce Pontellier transgresses the limits of the female role, wanders beyond the conventional conception of a married woman and rejoices in her newly-forged selfhood. That should be the climax, yet the dinner does not end here. The carnivalesque laughter and frolicking, together with the strong emotional and sensual atmosphere, is brought to an end by Victor Lebrun. Victor's singing and good humor add to the convivial atmosphere of the evening. He becomes the embodiment of Dionysus' playful, sensual satyr (Easterling, 1997, 38)—he is draped in a white silk scarf, with "the garland of roses [which] transformed him into a vision of Oriental beauty" (Chopin, 1992, 118) singing a love song Edna associates with Robert. Victor's song relates to the Dionysian dynamic in that it has a similar impact on Edna as satyr's light and enjoyable performance during mysteries had on the Ancient audience. The principle of satyr's performance to "bring them [audience] back to their senses" (Easterling, 1997, 38) reverberates in the consequences of Victor's musical performance. Behind Victor's song looms the truth which brings on horror and makes Edna strongly aware of her position. Mrs. Pontellier's ensuing somber mood results from the realization of her inability to go on living the life from before her Grand Isle experience. Her epiphany centers on the disagreement between social demands and her own desires.[17] To prevent Victor from torturing her with the song, she puts "her glass so impetuously and blindly upon the table as to shatter it against a carafe" (Chopin, 1992, 120). The spilling of the wine—the nectar of the gods—destroys the atmosphere of conviviality and celebration. In so doing, the spilt wine changes Edna from the semi-goddess and priestess back into her "ordinary" human form. With the wine not consumed to celebrate new life, but rather squandered, in an instant the heroine is reduced from heavenly perfection to mortal fallibility.She is vulnerable again, since, with the awareness of what she has gone through, she cannot go back to living a life of quiet desperation with Léonce. The guests disperse, as they are unable to either understand or help Edna.

You are what—and where and with whom—you eat. Thus, the changeability of identity is reflected in dietary habits. Bell and Valentine assert in *Consuming Geographies* that "changes in identity [...] are articulated on individuals' plates—affecting not only what is bought to eat and the places from where it is purchased, but also who has prepared it and the spatial dynamics of when and where it is consumed within the home" (1997, 77). Bell and Valentine's observation finds confirmation in Edna's dining habits. After the last supper in her husband's mansion, she moves into a modest pigeon-house with a very small dining-room. In such surroundings Edna welcomes Robert with an ordinary dinner, after his sojourn in Mexico (Chopin, 1992, 133). Her food grows simpler, as she becomes socially degraded. This is the price she has to pay for being more truthful to herself: "[t]here was with her a feeling of having descended in the social scale, with a corresponding sense of having risen in the spiritual" (124).

Edna's solitary dinners in the café Catiche, a garden café out in the suburbs, attest to the fact that the more independent she becomes, the less exquisite the food she eats in less fashionable places. The place in the garden which speaks to her needs is "too modest to attract the attention of people of fashion, and so quiet as to have escaped the notice of those in search of pleasure and dissipation" (139). The Catiche café is also the space

where the pivotal conversation between Edna and Robert begins only to continue in the privacy of Edna's pigeon-house. The scene echoes the ideological implications of the meal Robert procured for Edna on Chênière Caminada. A different codification of gender inequality, which was elegantly masked by Robert performing the feminine task of nurturing through food, rebounds on the lovers' future. The café Catiche/pigeon house scene announces the breakup of their relationship as Edna refuses to accept the destiny which immerses her in a man's life, be it that of her husband or lover. Even though in the end the heroine proves that she is not ready to define her destiny without taking into account social opinions, she does not want to be with a man who obliquely reproduces the patriarchal patterns.

In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin is able to advance feminist ideology through food-related scenes which covertly question gender roles while camouflaging feminist thought in local color discourse. From a tool of patriarchal control, food becomes an avenue for Edna's questioning of gender boundaries. Dining rituals become a potent signifier of Edna Pontellier's self-exploration, her gaining of autonomy and her attempts at asserting her personhood.

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NOTES

1. The research for the present article was made possible through the generous support of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Institute, Free University, Berlin. The JFKI grant enabled me to conduct extensive research about Southern foodways as well as about the sociology and anthropology of food.

2. "The best hotel, Krantz's [in Grand Isle], was the model for Klein's in *The Awakening*" (Toth, 1999, 78).

3. Quoting a chocolate expert, Lupton remarks that chocolate "is a sign of romance, also symbolizing luxury, decadence, indulgence, reward, sensuousness and femininity" (1996, 35).

4. Finkelstein claims that "dining out is seen as an expression of one's individuality: we choose to dine out, there is no compulsion to do so; we select a restaurant with food that appeals to our palate and which is within our price range; the event can summarize our knowledge of food and interests in pleasure, status, fashionability and entertainment" (1989, 4).

5. Eating out has class connotations and is gender-limited. In traditional societies women are discouraged from eating out, whereas affluent men can freely enjoy dinners outside their homes (Warde and Martens, 2000, 69).

6. Mary Ann Wimsatt makes interesting comments on the midday-dinner at the Ratignolles' in her article "'Intellectual Repasts': The Changing Role of Food in Southern Literature" (1992, 66).

7. Their conversation after Edna waking up retains the fairytale-like quality:

> "How many years have I slept ?" she inquired. [...]
>
> "You have slept precisely one hundred years. I was left here to guard your slumbers ; and for one hundred years I have been out under the shed reading a book. The only evil I couldn't prevent was to keep a broiled fowl from drying up."
>
> "If it has turned to stone, still will I eat it," said Edna, moving with him into the house.
>
> (Chopin, 1992, 49-50)

8. "Sailing across the bay to the *Chênière Caminada*, Edna felt as if she were being borne away from some anchorage which had held her fast, whose chains had been loosening—had snapped the night before when the mystic spirit was abroad, leaving her free to drift whithersoever she chose to set her sails" (Chopin, 1992, 45).

9. Bernard observes that "the Cajuns can be viewed [...] as the product of Anglo-Saxonism, for their eighteenth-century Acadian ancestors were brutally exiled from Nova Scotia by the British government, which viewed the French-Catholic minority as a threat to its North American empire. [...] [In Louisiana] they intermarried with other ethnic groups on the semitropical frontier [...]. This cross-cultural pollination transformed the region's white ethnic groups into a single new ethnic group, the Cajuns" (2003, xix).
"[C]aught between the cultures, no longer fully Acadian and not fully assimilated Americans," Cajuns occupy the interstitial social and cultural position "somewhere between white aristocratic Creole and black Louisiana cultures, questioning both social and racial classifications" (Hebert-Leiter, 2009, 11 and 57).
10. Cajuns in Chopin's fiction are "social creatures, participating in balls that convene the community to partake of food, drink, and music. In class status, they rest below Creoles and are closer to the African American servants' social status as laborers" (Hebert-Leiter, 2009, 65). Hebert-Leiter also makes interesting comments about Edna using Madame Antoine's interstitial position of a Cajun to voice her own hidden desires (2009, 71).
11. Hebert-Leiter makes a similar case claiming that Cajuns' "interstitial position [...] becomes the ground for Chopin's subtle critique of patriarchal structures because this between space allows Edna's imagination to reach a place beyond Creole society and its dictates" (2009, 71).
12. "One main message of food, everywhere, is *solidarity*. Eating together means sharing and participating. The word 'companion' means 'bread sharer' (Latin *cum panis*)" (Anderson, 2005, 125).
13. Bettina Knapp saw similar paradigmatic references to religious ritual in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse.*
14. The guest of honor and the seating arrangement during dinner at the Ratignolle's also betray the hosts' social sympathies (90).
15. For the connection between food, memories and sensory experiences, see David Sutton, "Synesthesia, Memory, and the Taste of Home" (2005, 305, 311-12).
16. To learn more about the Aphrodite archetype see Jean Shinoda Bolen's chapter "Aphrodite: Goddess of Love and Beauty, Creative Woman and Lover" in her *Goddesses in Everywoman : Powerful Archetypes in Women's Lives*, Harper Collins, 2008.
17. According to Mary Ann Wimsatt, the outcome of the banquet communicates "the discrepancy between Edna's public status as wife and mother and her private desire for a freedom that neither illicit love nor sumptuous decor can supply" (1992, 67).

ABSTRACTS

In *The Awakening* Kate Chopin uses foodways to define and transgress the social and cultural boundaries of acceptable female behavior as well as to reinscribe woman's identity through the culinary dimension of her heroine's life. The novelist uses eating and dining scenes as metaphors for Edna Pontellier's search for her female selfhood and, in a broader perspective, as symbols of the major issue of her own fiction—gender trouble in the South. In this article I will analyze how various dining experiences become metaphors for Edna's disintegrating marriage; how the liberating exposure to Creole culture and Cajuns' interstitial social position allows Edna to assert her agency through culinary practices; and, in general, how her journey to self-knowledge and

subjectivity within a marriage that has diminished her to non-personhood is framed through foodways.

Dans *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin utilise les traditions culinaires pour définir et transgresser les prescriptions sociales et culturelles qui définissent le comportement féminin traditionnel et acceptable. Elle s'en sert également pour réinscrire l'identité féminine grâce à la dimension culinaire de la vie de son héroïne. L'auteur utilise les scènes de partage de repas comme des métaphores de la recherche d'Edna Pontellier d'une identité propre et, de façon plus large, comme des symboles de la thématique qui s'inscrit au cœur de son récit – les relations problématiques entre hommes et femmes (relations de genre) dans le Sud. Dans cet article, j'analyse comment ces différentes expériences de partage de repas deviennent des métaphores de la détérioration du mariage d'Edna ; comment l'exposition à la culture créole et à la position interstice des Cajuns permettent à Edna de se libérer et de s'affirmer au moyen des pratiques culinaires ; enfin, comment, au sein d'un mariage qui l'a privée de toute identité propre, les pratiques culinaires permettent un parcours vers la découverte de soi et la subjectivité.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Cajun, Culture créole, Idéologie féministe, Kate Chopin, Libération d'Edna Pontellier, relations de genre (féminin/masculin) dans le Sud, The Awakening, Traditions culinaires
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AUTHOR

URSZULA NIEWIADOMSKA-FLIS

Assistant Professor
Department of American Literature and Culture
The Institute of English
John Paul II Catholic University of Lubli